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RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 3972
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0010
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1666
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0860
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2154
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 002060

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN
UNOSCE FOR ELIZABETH KAUFMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2017
TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV KDEM OSCE UZ
SUBJECT: ODIHR TEAM COMPLETES RUSHED NEEDS ASSESSMENT
MISSION

Classified By: Poloff Tim Buckley for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Two officials from OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) conducted a hastily organized needs assessment mission from November 28 - 30 in Uzbekistan, immediately after MFA stopped dragging its feet on issuing visas. The ODIHR team met with each of the registered political parties in Uzbekistan, who reported a uniformly positive picture of pre-election conditions. Even parties which did not meet the high threshold of required signatures to place candidates on the ballot did not complain, instead criticizing themselves for "not functioning properly". While MFA orchestrated the official agenda, local OSCE staff arranged private meetings for the ODIHR team with unregistered parties Birlik and Ezgulik, who "balanced the rosy official picture" with complaints of political oppression. With just three weeks remaining until the election, the ODIHR team will immediately report results of the needs assessment mission to its Warsaw headquarters for a prompt decision on whether to send an observer mission. In addition to OSCE, the GOU is inviting several other regional organizations, sympathetic countries, and hundreds of individuals to observe the elections, and Ezgulik is trying to register a domestic observation effort which will likely not be approved. A small-scale observer mission is the only possibility given official constraints imposed by the GOU and the lack of time to adequately prepare, but even a small observer mission can benefit long-term USG and OSCE interests in Uzbekistan despite the inevitable outcome of the elections. End summary.

Hastily Arranged Visit

¶2. (C) Two ODIHR officials visited Uzbekistan from November 28 - 30 to conduct a needs assessment mission, which is a standard procedure before deciding on the nature and scope of election observer missions. They briefed OSCE member state representatives and others at COB on November 30 and also privately briefed Charge d'Affaires earlier that day. The trip was hastily organized after the GOU dragged its feet on

issuing visas, and ODIHR's Konrad Olszewski noted that Uzbekistan "has been mirroring Russia almost exactly, even with the same conditions specified." Given the short timeframe until elections, the ODIHR team traveled immediately to Tashkent and "improvised" the needs assessment mission. (Note: It's good that they traveled quickly, as MFA provided only a four-day window of eligibility on their visas. End note.)

Not a Single Area for Improvement

¶3. (C) Upon arrival in Tashkent, the team received a warm welcome and "good signals," and MFA even opened its VIP lounge for meetings. The ODIHR team met with representatives from each of the three registered political parties who managed to successfully register candidates in highly-orchestrated events set up by MFA. The parties presented a "united and positive picture of pre-election conditions" and did not offer a single concern or area for suggested improvement in the election process. Even the two parties whose candidates were excluded from the ballot after failing to meet a dauntingly high threshold of required voter signatures within a short timeframe did not complain about this burdensome requirement; they instead criticized themselves for "not functioning properly." The ODIHR team expressed suspicion during a private meeting with Charge at how some parties actually did manage to gather more than 900,000 signatures in a short timeframe for their candidates to qualify for the ballot.

Conditions Look Good on the Surface

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¶4. (C) The ODIHR team noted that the election process looks good on the surface, as there is a plurality of choice with three candidates from different political parties and an "initiative group." Of these, one candidate is a woman and one is non-partisan (the ODIHR team did not meet with representatives of Mr. Saidov, the candidate affiliated with the GOU's NCHR rather than a political party). The Central Election Commission is providing television access to all candidates, and is airing a series of carefully staged question and answer sessions with candidates -- including President Karimov -- which are being held throughout the country. Olszewski noted that since the process of registering candidates and placing them on the ballots has finished, any remaining election decisions during the campaign will not likely be contentious. Olszewski hypothesized that the real contest will be which province can deliver the highest turnout with the most favorable results for President Karimov.

Unregistered Parties Remain Shut Out

¶5. (C) The ODIHR team officially requested meetings with officials of unregistered parties, to which MFA replied that it was "under consideration" and "they would let them know." With just three days in Uzbekistan and no response forthcoming, the OSCE Project Coordinator's Office in Tashkent quietly facilitated private meetings with Birlik and Ezgulik representatives. In these unscripted meetings the ODIHR team told the Charge that they "got a chance to balance the very rosy picture" provided by the GOU. These parties were "less happy" and "complained about political oppression." Birlik noted that it remains unregistered despite meeting the qualifications and officially applying in 2000, 2004, and 2005. Olszewski also reported in a briefing to the diplomatic corps that they received complaints "that this is not a real contest because there is no plurality of choice."

¶ 16. (C) A key issue in any observer mission, especially given the tight timeframe before elections, is ensuring that observers are promptly issued visas by the MFA. As of the end of the needs assessment mission, MFA remained coy and did not provide any assurances that they would quickly accommodate visa requests for observers. The ODIHR team noted that they will draft their report and travel on the weekend to facilitate a rapid decision in Warsaw, and said observers could be deployed as early as December 5. ODIHR has already publicized position announcements for experts on its website and has received applications. ODIHR team told the Charge if a decision is made to deploy an observation mission, ODIHR believed it could find up to 25-30 observers, the limit the GOU put on the size of the mission.

Three Observer Mission Options Presented

¶ 17. (C) Olszewski informed the diplomatic corps that according to ODIHR methodology there are typically three different types of possible observer missions. The first is a full-scale effort, with both long-term and short-term observers in place for many weeks, which he said was not possible in this context given the short timeframe and the GOU restriction of 25-30 short-term observers. The second is a limited election observer mission, which focuses on analyzing the pre-election environment. It includes no short-term observers and thus cannot include any systematic observation of election day procedures. The third option

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features groups of experts who follow specific elections processes, but this is typically only utilized in countries "with a long-established tradition of democratic elections." The British Ambassador noted that none of these options appears viable in this context, and Olszewski declined to speculate about ODIHR's decision. However, he noted in a private courtesy call with Charge that the invitation is appreciated and there is still -- barely -- enough time to mount some sort of observer mission. He added that ODIHR does not want to be haphazard and any observer mission must be able to carry out meaningful observation activities, and it is clear that any observer mission to Uzbekistan would be an unusual case.

ODIHR Observers Would Have Plenty of Company

¶ 18. (C) In addition to a possible ODIHR mission, election observers will be present from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and a number of bi-lateral observers from other former Soviet states. MFA also informed the ODIHR team that approximately 250 private individuals will also be invited to observe elections, including some from western nations. The ODIHR team "did not want to waste any time" considering these observers since their credibility will be suspect and the GOU's motivation in interviewing them on mass media is clear. Poloff spoke with a Korean diplomat at the ODIHR briefing to the diplomatic corps, who reported that the South Korean Embassy was approached by the GOU on November 30 and asked to arrange for ten private citizen observers to come to Uzbekistan, which the Koreans "are not at all interested in doing" but were curious if other missions were asked.

¶ 19. (C) The ODIHR team reported that the Ezgulik organization submitted an application to the GOU on November 9 to conduct a domestic observer mission. The team was impressed that Ezgulik plans to mobilize 1,000 people to participate, which Olszewski noted "would be a massive effort and significant even without an official registration." Unsurprisingly, there has been no response thus far from the GOU.

Comment

¶10. (C) ODIHR is clearly trying to make up for lost time and could announce a decision on an observer mission as early as December 3, while there is still enough time to mount a small-scale observer mission. While the GOU's visa games cloud the logistical picture of sending observers at this late stage, the outcome of the election is not in doubt and the GOU is already assured that ODIHR's mission will be at most a small, limited effort. Ultimately, the GOU has little to lose in issuing the visas at this stage and can claim credibility for inviting and hosting an OSCE observer mission. Post got the impression from our private meeting that the ODIHR advance team wants to accept the invitation and send some sort of observer mission, especially after its recent experience with Russia. We believe that even a small ODIHR observer mission is in the long-term regional interests of the USG and the OSCE, providing that the GOU is not able to dictate the composition of the ODIHR team.

HANSON